COMMENTARY ON PHILEMON
BY OECUMENIUS
6th CENTURY

Also called the Pseudo-Oecumenian Catena on Philemon

Translated by John Litteral

10-13-2025

Foreword

This commentary on Philemon was written by Oecumenius, who was a Greek Early Church Father of the sixth century. Not everyone agrees that this was written by Oecumenius. I go into this in more detail in the introduction of my recent translation of the commentary on Hebrews by Oecumenius. This commentary was written by Oecumenius as a compilation of quotes from various Early Church Fathers that lived prior to him, which is in the manner called *Catena*. In this version that I translated, which is from the Patrologia Graeca, volume 119, printed in 1864, does not have any indicators showing that any of the content comes from any specific ancient Christian writer, and it has the appearance of being written as a running commentary by Oecumenius himself. According to Dr. Karl Staab, in his edition called "Pauline commentaries from the Greek Church" [*Pauluskommentare aus der griechischen Kirche*], there are two excerpts for the letter to Philemon which indicate that one excerpt is by Photius of Constantinople, and one by Oecumenius himself, both found in the comments on verse 24. I added indicators for those two excerpts in this translation. According to my thesis, Photius (810-891A.D.) lived after Oecumenius (6th century), which means that the excerpt by Photius was added to the text of the catena by a later copyist. Oecumenius depended greatly upon the homilies and commentaries of John Chrysostom (died around 407A.D.) for his own catenae/commentaries on Paul's Epistles, though Oecumenius condensed and reworked what Chrysostom wrote. Oecumenius also relied upon Theodoret of Cyrus (393-457A.D.), as can be seen in the Preface.

COMMENTARY BY OECUMENIUS

ON THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

HYPOTHESIS ON THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

Paul sends this from Rome; and the cause of the letter is this: Onesimus, the servant of Philemon, fled; and having gone to the apostle Paul, he was instructed by him, and became useful to him in ministry. Therefore, he writes to Philemon about this, praising Onesimus, so that he may receive him sincerely, and no longer have him as a slave, but as a brother. He also urged him to prepare a welcome for him, so that if he comes, he may find a place to stay. And thus, he completes the letter. It is noteworthy that this Onesimus was also deemed worthy of martyrdom in the city of Rome, at that time under the authority of Tertullus the governor, having endured the breaking of his legs as to undergo martyrdom.

THEODORET

Philemon was a remarkable man, a Phrygian by birth, and his city was Colossae; he was faithful in character and shared in the needs of the saints. Onesimus, a slave of his, ran away, having stolen from him. Onesimus, coming to Rome to Paul, was instructed by him and, having been baptized, became remarkable even while Paul was in chains. Paul sends him back to Philemon, having made this letter a recommendation for Onesimus. Some say that this letter should not be counted among the other epistles because it concerns a trivial matter. But see how many useful things come from it! First, it teaches us to be earnest even about trivial matters. Second, that if a slave has returned so boldly, those who are free should not despise them. Third, that it is not fitting, under the pretense of holiness, to separate slaves against the will of their

masters. Fourth, that we should not be ashamed of virtuous slaves, especially when Paul calls Onesimus his child. How then could such a letter, containing so much benefit, not be counted among the others?

The Epistle to Philemon by the Apostle Paul

Philemon 1-3 ***Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker, and to Apphia our beloved, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***

Paul, a prisoner. Immediately from the opening words he instructs the master not to shame the servant. For all things, even chains, are good for Christ. And that it is right for grace to be given to the prisoner for Christ.

and Timothy our brother. He includes Timothy as a partner in the supplication.

to Philemon our beloved. If beloved, he will grant favor; if a coworker, he will not put the servant to shame in the service of the preaching. Onesimus, having been given, will also fulfill the work of the master Philemon.

and to Apphia our beloved, and Archippus. Perhaps Apphia was the wife of Philemon, and Archippus. But see the humility, for it also urges these to join in the supplication.

our fellow soldier. If a fellow soldier, he also struggles in this. This is the one about whom he writes to the Colossians: Tell

Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received." (Co. 4:17)

and to the church in your house. He invites the whole household, and slaves.

Grace to you. How then will the grace of God be with you? If you also forgive those who owe you. How then is peace? If you are reconciled to the servant.

The praise of Philemon and a thanksgiving on his behalf.

Philemon 4-9 ***I always thank my God, making mention of you in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; that the fellowship of your faith may become effective, in the knowledge of every good thing that is in us for Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. Therefore, having great boldness in Christ, I am commanding you what is proper, because of love, I urge you, being such as Paul the aged, but now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.***

If ever *I* make *mention of you*, I always do, *I give thanks to God* for you. Why? *Hearing of your love and faith*, he says. Do you see that he does not immediately seek favor from the beginning?

hearing of your love. which, if it were not great, would by no means be heard from Phrygia all the way to Rome.

that the fellowship of your faith. It unites him to himself, just as if he said: Fellowship of faith is that which makes one and common. But why do you give thanks to God? So *that the fellowship of your faith*, he says, *may become effective*. But how will it be effective? If it proceeds to every work of virtue. Blessed Paul interprets

himself. But how will it be *effective*? By this, that you have *the knowledge* and accomplish *every good thing*.

that is in us. He says that which is now also in us. (Matt. 25:40)

for Christ Jesus. For whoever does good to someone, does it to Christ, especially to the saints.

we have great joy. Not only, Paul says, did we rejoice, but such was the pleasure that it even brought us comfort while in bonds.

because the hearts of the saints. See! He wishes to say: If you grant favors to others, much more grant them to me; thus he does not say; but otherwise more skillfully. For he knows the memory of benefits done to others makes those who are urged more obedient.

have been refreshed through you. For, Paul says, they find rest in your love. They rest because of you. Since you are such a one toward the saints as to also give them rest, I have the boldness to command you. Having boldness because of Christ; to command you a fitting thing; for this is what is proper. But I said to command, not because I rule over you, but because of the love which I love you and am loved by you, I seem to command, but I do not command. For even if I appear to command you, it is out of love that I do not command but rather encourage. Thus, I do the matter with great regard. Being such a one, as Paul an elder. And I exhort, being such a one as one ought to be, he says, to persuade.

Paul. And this alone is sufficient to persuade,

the aged, but now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Do you see the motives for persuading?

Recommendation of Onesimus, a runaway servant, and an appeal on his behalf, who has been saved through faith.

<u>Philemon 10-14</u> ***I therefore appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my chains, formerly useless to you, but now indeed useful both to you and to me, whom I have sent back. I appeal to you to receive him as my very heart: whom I wished to keep with me, so that he might serve me in the chains of the gospel on your behalf; but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed would not be forced but voluntary.***

Paul mentions Philemon first, praising the servant as a beloved child, because he says he also baptized him. For this is the one, "*I have begotten while in my chains*." Therefore, having calmed his anger through these things, he thus gives the name *Onesimus*, he says.

formerly useless to you. For he knows that the acknowledged sin is to extinguish the master's anger.

but now indeed useful both to you and to me. If such faithfulness is useful to Paul, who demands so much, it is clearly also useful to Philemon.

whom I have sent back. To hand Onesimus over to the master, rather extinguished his anger.

to receive him as my very heart. What do I mean by "*receive him*"? Receiving this one, you will receive my own very *heart*. Thus he says, I love him as one calls him his own *heart*. And "*receive*" means to accept with love.

so that he might serve me in the chains of the gospel on your behalf. Do you see that Paul has brought the master to the very place, little by little? For he says that *he serves me on your behalf*. Here he

shows that he wishes what is more advantageous for the master. For if you say that you ought to serve, and he does this instead of you, the benefit is yours.

in the chains of the gospel. In chains for the sake of the Gospel.

without your consent. This was especially humiliating for him, that he did not do something so necessary for him without your consent.

so that your good deed would not be forced but voluntary. Paul did not say, "By force," but, "would not be forced;" as if he had said, "I knew that even against your will, forcing Onesimus on you, I would not cause you pain. But so that it may not seem to be done by force, I was not willing," he says.

> **Philemon 15-20** ***For I suppose that for this reason he was separated for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would me. And if he has wronged you or owes you anything, charge that to me. I, Paul, write this with my own hand—I will repay it—to avoid saying to you that you owe me your own self as well. Yes, brother. May I enjoy refreshment in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.***

Since Onesimus has changed his mind from being a wicked one, he himself turns it to the doubtful, as if he said: For perhaps he fled for reasons of caution.

for this reason he was separated. With a euphemistic name, Paul called it separation, so that the memory of the separation would

not provoke the master. Then he also limits the time, calming the anger, or he speaks in terms of a season of the year.

so that you might have him back forever, you have, that is, you receive.

But more than a slave. Do you see that escaping brought many benefits? For instead of an hour of escape, you have an eternal one. (For the escape is but one hour compared to eternity.) And instead of a worthless slave, you have received *a beloved brother.*

how much more to you. If to me, much more to you, even in worldly services. For this is "*in the flesh*." And in spiritual matters. For this is "*in the Lord*."

So if you consider me a partner. That is, if you think and wish the same things as I do.

welcome him as you would me. Wow, how great is the magnitude of those words!

And if he has wronged you. Paul did not say, "He stole," but the verb is cut short. He says he *wronged or owes*.

charge that to me. For it was likely that they themselves had consumed together the things that had been stolen, and Paul says, "*charge this to me*," that is, charge these things as a debt to me, let the obligation be held against me.

I, Paul, write. He wrote with spiritual grace, as if he said, But for safe keeping, that I will repay the debt, I have made the letters with my own hand.

to avoid saying to you that you owe me your own self as well. So that Paul may not seem to insult him by not daring to appeal to him openly on behalf of the runaway slave (for this would show Philemon to be somewhat harsh), it shows that Paul is also very

confident in Philemon. For he says not only your own things, but also yourself you owe to me.

Yes, brother. Again, from what is pleasing it advances to what is serious. "*Yes*," he said, "*brother*." What? Accept it yourself. I will take advantage from you in things that are according to Christ.

May I enjoy. That is, I delight in your excellent works in the Lord. May I see you growing rich in all spiritual blessings.

refresh my heart. Paul says, Refresh my love for you for the sake of Christ.

> **Philemon 21-25** ***I wrote to you, confident in your obedience, knowing that you will also do more than I say. At the same time, prepare a lodging for me; for I hope that through your prayers I will be granted the opportunity to come to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my co-workers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.***

confident. Paul said, "You do this not for me, but for Christ."

confident in your obedience. I did not write to you as one commanding or stubbornly dealing with you, but having confidence *in your obedience*. Whom would these things not soften, even if he were made of iron?

knowing that you will also do more than I say. Paul said this, persuading Philemon in every way to accept Onesimus, if not for any other reason, then at least so as not to destroy his own reputation if he had any with the Apostle.

prepare a lodging for me. Paul says that he did not write only because of Onesimus (for Philemon would have said, if not for

himself, that I was not worthy of even a word), but also for this reason, he says, that you might *prepare a lodging for me*. And Philemon was even afraid that if he did not receive Onesimus, the Apostle would come and it would be known that he had been disobedient.

for I hope that through your prayers. Great indeed is the power of prayers, and great also is the humility of Paul, because he was in need of those prayers.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner. This man was sent from the Colossians to Paul, as it is clear that Philemon was from Colossae. He is called a fellow prisoner, indicating that he too was in great distress. Moreover, this also honors him; for Epaphras was indeed a fellow prisoner, whereas this one did not even show kindness to Onesimus, who was a prisoner for the Lord.

Aristarchus, Demas. About this, Paul wrote to Timothy, "Demas abandoned me." (2 Tim. 4:10)

[PHOTIUS] They say that this Demas again turned away to Hellenism and became a priest of idols. [*end of the Photius excerpt*]

[OECUMENIUS] And if that was at first, now he has repented. But if later, after these things he became negligent. [*end of the excerpt by Oecumenius*]

Luke. The last became first. For if in the second letter to Timothy he says, Luke is the only one with me. (2 Tim. 4:11) And he calls them *co-workers*, showing that these also, he says, are encouraging you with me.

"Finished, with divine help, the Epistle to Philemon."

Written from Rome, through Onesimus the servant.